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Flexible Presence: A Concept for the 21st Century

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**Flexible Presence:
A Concept for the 21st Century**

James S. Thomason
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PREFACE

This paper, which has been cleared for public release and unlimited distribution, was presented by Dr. Thomason and Dr. Barnett to the Military Operation Research Symposium in June 1997 at Quantico Marine Base, Quantico, Virginia. The principal concept explored in this paper is what we call "Flexible Presence." This concept fits squarely within the "Shaping" and "Responding" components of the new U.S. defense strategy, as promulgated by Secretary of Defense William Cohen in his May 1997 *Report on the Quadrennial Defense Review*. The authors would like to thank Eileen Doherty and Barbara Varvaglione for their expert assistance in editing and preparing this manuscript.

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FLEXIBLE PRESENCE: A CONCEPT FOR THE 21ST CENTURY

It is June, 2001. In March, the President dispatched a carrier battlegroup to the coast of Africa to deter an invasion of the fledgling democracy of Freedonia. The strongman ruler of neighboring Sylvania had threatened Freedonia in the name of "protecting ethnic Sylvanians," and U.S. satellites had detected a buildup of Sylvanian forces along the Freedonian border. The carrier embarked an air wing and a Marine detachment with helicopter lift. Overflights of the Sylvania/Freedonia border by Navy aircraft had made the U.S. presence visible. That presence, and a presidential declaration that the United States would not tolerate the resolution of territorial disputes by use of force, had deterred Sylvania from attacking.

In June, however, the still simmering crisis boiled over. While attempting to contain an anti-government demonstration, Freedonian police killed two young ethnic Sylvanians. Increasingly violent demonstrations followed. Incorrectly believing that Freedonia would not request U.S. assistance in the face of such dissent, the Sylvanian leader ordered an attack.

After hastily called discussions with the Freedonian government, the President decided to provide air support. Drawing on a contingency plan formulated with the Freedonian military, Navy aircraft began to fly strikes against Sylvanian forces. The Marine detachment went ashore to reinforce the U.S. embassy and to help State Department personnel locate and evacuate the 500 U.S. citizens in Freedonia. In the United States, Air Force bombers and a brigade of the 82nd Airborne were placed on alert to backup the battlegroup, if necessary.

Shortly after the invasion, opponents of the Freedonian government, aided by Sylvanian agents, attempted a coup d'état. Rebel military forces attacked the airport and other key installations in the Freedonian capital. With the turmoil threatening U.S. citizens and preventing their evacuation, the President decided to seize the airport. Elements of the 82nd Airborne, flown from the United States, landed nearby and moved against it. Resistance was light and disorganized, because most rebels were engaged fighting the government. Soon after the taking of the airport, Air Force transports lifted

in Army reinforcements. Within days, the evacuation had resumed. With Navy air strikes hammering the lead Sylvanian invaders, and Army forces in the Freedomian capital, the Sylvanian strongman halted his attack and began to withdraw.

By July, Freedomia was no longer militarily in danger. A flexible, joint U.S. presence, tailored to the situation at hand, had initially deterred hostile action. When deterrence nevertheless failed, it responded to terminate the crisis with rapid support from forces in the United States.

With the end of the Cold War and resultant shrinking armed forces, some question the value to the United States of overseas military presence. But we believe presence is important to furthering key objectives of our national security strategy.¹ This article begins by discussing why presence is an important issue. It then discusses the objectives of presence in the context of the national security strategy, and how presence operations can achieve those objectives. It concludes that CINCs and Joint Staff planners should think about presence globally—anywhere it might best support our strategy. To maximize our presence reach, they should consider the capabilities of all the Services and plan to conduct operations using situationally tailored force packages. Accordingly, they should break the Navy and the Marine Corps out of their schedules of deployment to traditional areas of responsibility, and use maritime assets as parts of tailored force packages wherever required to achieve our objectives. Finally, when thinking about deterrence, planners should focus on small Navy and Marine Corps task forces deployed forward, backed up by rapidly deployable forces from CONUS. They should exploit the abilities of maritime forces to loiter near the scenes of developing crises to deter conflict, and CONUS-based forces to strike or reinforce quickly, if needed. Flexible presence should be a guiding concept for the 21st century.

¹ Since 1994, we have worked on the issue of overseas military presence for the Commission on Roles and Missions of the Armed Forces and the Office of the Secretary of Defense. See James S. Thomason, et al., *Presence Analyses for the Commission on Roles and Missions of the Armed Forces*, Institute for Defense Analyses, IDA D-1707, April 1995; James S. Thomason and D. Sean Barnett, *IDA Analyses of Overseas Presence for the Commission on Roles and Missions*, Institute for Defense Analyses, IDA D-1725, June 1995; James S. Thomason, et al., *Evolving Service Roles in Presence Missions*, Institute for Defense Analyses, IDA P-3146, August 1995.

A. OVERSEAS MILITARY PRESENCE AND WHY IT IS AN IMPORTANT ISSUE

We define overseas military presence to include any Defense Department assets located overseas or engaged overseas in non-combat operations. Why is presence an important issue? Three reasons. First, many senior U.S. military decision makers believe presence is important in promoting national security strategy objectives. As Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General John Shalikashvili stated recently: "...power projection, enabled by overseas presence, will likely remain the fundamental strategic concept of our future force."² Or, as General Colin Powell put it: "Our forward presence is a given—to signal our commitment to our allies and to give second thoughts to any disturber of the peace."³ "Economic power is essential; political and diplomatic skills are needed; the power of our beliefs and values is fundamental to any success we might achieve; but the presence of our arms to buttress these other elements is as critical to us as the freedom we so adore."⁴

Second, with the end of the Cold War our national security strategy has changed. Our old strategy, under which we maintained an extensive overseas presence, aimed to contain the Soviet Union. But our new strategy is one of engagement, with the objectives of enhancing security, and promoting prosperity at home and democracy abroad. Do we still need overseas presence? If so, should we provide it any differently than we have in the past?

Third, procuring forces for presence, and operating and supporting them overseas, is expensive. In this day of tight budgets and a shrinking force structure, if presence is desirable, we should provide it as efficiently as possible. We have too many interests and commitments and too few forces to be everywhere at once.

1. The Objectives of Presence

The Joint Staff defines the objectives of overseas military presence to be peacetime engagement, deterrence, and providing crisis response capability. They follow

² The Joint Chiefs of Staff, *Joint Vision 2010*, The United States Department of Defense, 1996, p. 3. See also Secretary of Defense William Perry, "Defense in an Age of Hope," *Foreign Affairs*, November-December 1996.

³ General Colin Powell, "U.S. Forces: Challenges Ahead," *Foreign Affairs*, Winter 1992-93, p. 36.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 33.

from the objectives of our National Military Strategy: promoting stability through regional cooperation and constructive interaction, and thwarting aggression through deterrence and warfighting capabilities.

2. Peacetime Engagement

Peacetime engagement includes interactions between the U.S. military and foreign militaries and governments, from visits, to exercises, to contingency and host nation support planning, to humanitarian operations. According to former Secretary of Defense William Perry, peacetime engagement is intended to “influence events abroad that can affect the well-being of Americans.”⁵ According to General Shalikashvili, peacetime engagement demonstrates our commitments, strengthens our capabilities, and enhances the organization of coalitions and multinational operations.⁶

3. Deterrence

Deterrence works by convincing potential actors that if they act, we will punish them, and their costs will outweigh the benefit from their act. Deterrence thus rests upon the actors perceiving that we have both the capability and the will to punish them. Different kinds of forces (air forces, naval forces, and ground forces), operating from different locations (in theater ashore, in theater at sea, or in CONUS), may differ in their deterrent effects.

Capability to Punish. This is an inherent property of military forces. The amount and kind of punishment, however, must be tailored to the parties concerned. Different forms of punishment deter some parties much more than others.

Perceived Willingness to Use Force. Potential actors must believe that we are willing to use force. The *perception* that we would not be willing to employ force has resulted in the failure of deterrence—Iraq invaded Kuwait in 1990 because of this misperception. Our *actual* willingness to use force depends on how important an interest is to us, and our probable cost, in terms of friendly losses and collateral damage inflicted. Even during the Gulf War, fear of inflicting excessive collateral damage shaped our use of air power. An adversary’s *perception* of our willingness to use force, on the other hand, may depend on the visibility of our forces in theater and our conduct historically.

⁵ Secretary of Defense, *Annual Report to the President and the Congress*, March 1996, p. 2.

⁶ The Joint Chiefs of Staff, *op. cit.*, p. 3.

In Somalia, General Aideed attacked U.S. forces because he believed, on the basis of our conduct in Vietnam and Lebanon, that we were not willing to take the casualties that would come with using force.

4. Crisis Response

Crisis response—the restoration of stability—is required usually where deterrence fails. Many think of crisis response and combat first when they think of why the United States maintains forces overseas. Crisis response, however, can involve rapid deployments for deterrence, noncombatant evacuations, or humanitarian relief operations. Recent examples include Operations *Vigilant Warrior* (October 1994) and *Kobe Earthquake* (January 1995).⁷ Crisis response will remain an important objective of presence. Forces present overseas have historically been the first to respond to crises, although forces in CONUS can back them up, and in the future may even precede them on the scene.

B. ACHIEVING THE OBJECTIVES OF PRESENCE—OUTPUT-ORIENTED MEASURES

When considering how to achieve the objectives of presence, planners should think about force capabilities and the tasks to be performed—the “output” of presence. They should not be bound by tradition or conventional wisdom. General Shalikashvili has suggested that there may be a more joint, integrated means of providing presence:

[W]hen you project power and you would like to keep an aircraft carrier forward deployed to be ready for the unexpected, is it really necessary to do that all the time? Or is it possible, in some theaters, during the time that you don't have the carrier, to forward deploy certain ground-based air together with some Marines or Ranger type units? You might wish to supplement with some bombers on alert or forward-deployed. So you can create the effect on the ground, if need be, that is identical to the one the carrier would project. And so all of a sudden you say to yourself, 'Maybe I don't need to deploy the same capability all the time. Maybe I can build my forward presence around an Aegis cruiser and the air piece I forward deploy and put on the ground.'⁸

⁷ Secretary of Defense, op. cit., p. 266.

⁸ General John M. Shalikashvili, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, “Readiness: It's a Balancing Act,” *Air Force Times*, January 2, 1995.

The following is our understanding of the military capabilities best suited for achieving the objectives of presence.

1. Peacetime Engagement

To assess the military activities that are most effective in peacetime engagement, we interviewed nearly 50 senior U.S. military and diplomatic officials. The overwhelming consensus was that actual interaction—dialogue, visits, exercises, and others—not just being in or flying over an area, is the key to peacetime engagement. Peacetime engagement is most effective with U.S. forces based in an area, but a U.S. presence may clash with local cultures and U.S. bases and personnel are susceptible to attack—as shown in June of 1996 in Saudi Arabia. Finally, regular presence—though not necessarily continuous—of logistically supportable combat capability is crucial to effective peacetime engagement.

2. Deterrence

No combination of U.S. forces and basing is the optimal deterrent under all circumstances. Accordingly, we must remain flexible; moreover, in any situation, political limitations on basing may prevent us from putting the ideal deterrent in place.

Capability to Punish. Parties' interests and values are critical to deciding which forces to use to deter them. For example, air strikes against Libya in 1986 deterred Moammar Qaddafi from sponsoring terrorism,⁹ but air strikes against Bosnian Serbs did not deter them from violating heavy weapon exclusion zones or attacking Muslim enclaves. On the other hand, the deployment of NATO heavy ground forces to Bosnia with the IFOR did stop the fighting.

Perceived Willingness to Use Force. Considerations of perception may affect where we deploy forces and what kind we deploy. Location may affect the perception of our willingness to use force. Forces ashore—because we will not abandon them in a crisis—indicate a stronger willingness. But forces in CONUS—because they can go practically anywhere and they are invisible to distant parties—may indicate less.¹⁰ Forces

⁹ At least in the short run. Libyan agents are believed to be responsible for the 1988 bombing of Pan Am Flight 103 over Lockerbie, Scotland.

¹⁰ The United States may be able to make forces in CONUS more visible by, for example, allowing CNN to broadcast images of the 82nd Airborne preparing to take off.

afloat—because they are present nearby but can easily steam away from a crisis—fall somewhere in between.

The kinds of forces we use may affect our costs and thus our actual willingness to use force. Use of air power may result in fewer friendly casualties but greater collateral damage. Use of ground forces, particularly light infantry, may result in a greater number of casualties but less collateral damage. Use of a combined arms force, or one of largely one type backed up by forces of other types from outside the theater, should give a commander a powerful set of capabilities to dissuade our adversaries.

3. Crisis Response

All Services today have assets useful for crisis response. Forces also can deploy from CONUS rapidly, so commanders have basing options they did not have in the past. To get the most from our forces, crisis response plans should reflect all their capabilities and all their potential basing and deployment modes in conjunction with the tasks they will perform.¹¹

The Capabilities of All the Services. Today's commanders can deploy Navy and Marine aircraft by sea, send Air Force fighter wings and Army attack helicopters to bases in theater by air, and employ Air Force bombers directly from CONUS. They can deploy Marine ground forces by sea and Army forces by air (in some cases employing them directly from CONUS). These options extend the United States' presence reach, even with a smaller force structure. They also allow us to overcome potential political obstacles associated with base access more readily than before.

Today's capabilities allow commanders to combine forces in nontraditional but effective ways as well. In our scenario, a Navy carrier battlegroup (CVBG) embarked an air wing and a Marine infantry detachment, and was reinforced by Army airborne and airlanding forces lifted by Air Force transports. In 1996, an amphibious ready group (ARG) off the coast of Liberia evacuated noncombatants organized ashore by Army Special Operations forces. In Southwest Asia, we have a carrier battlegroup deployed to the Indian Ocean, we rotate Air Force squadrons out to bases in theater, and Air Force bombers can attack targets directly from CONUS.

¹¹ This is directly analogous to the current Defense Department initiative to get CINCs to "specify their missions as joint mission-essential task lists (JMETLs)." Secretary of Defense, op. cit., p. 26.

Basing and Deployment Alternatives. Basing and deployment possibilities are important in selecting forces to perform different military functions in different regions of the world during crises, because of their impact on force response times. Because today we can deploy to overseas bases faster, commanders have crisis response options that were previously unavailable. Alternatively, consideration of all the forces that might perform different functions in different regions, and how long maritime forces, land-based forces deploying, or land-based forces operating from CONUS might take to arrive and begin operations, allows planners to judge the value of access to bases in theater in the first place.

One can also draw general principles from such assessments.¹² If land-based forces can perform a military function, they will respond faster than maritime forces if the United States has access to a base in theater, and the maritime forces are located farther than two days steaming time from the scene of the crisis. If land-based forces can perform a function directly from CONUS, then base access is unnecessary. But if the United States has no base access, and the function cannot be performed from CONUS, then maritime forces must perform the function. These principles reinforce the notion that all Services can contribute to rapid crisis response and that planners should consider innovative, and potentially nontraditional, options to get the most out of our overseas presence and projection capabilities.¹³

C. FLEXIBLE PRESENCE—CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR THE NAVY AND THE MARINE CORPS

The United States' post-Cold War national security strategy of global enlargement and engagement, the Services' capabilities to conduct operations around the world, and the need to get the most out of our forces in times of scarce resources, has implications for presence generally and the Navy and Marine Corps specifically. First, CINCs and

¹² In our earlier work, from which we draw the principles cited here, we devised a planning framework in which we considered three regions (the Mediterranean Sea, the Indian Ocean, and the West Pacific Ocean), and seven notional military functions a commander might wish to have performed (emplacement of an air wing in a major regional contingency, noncombatant evacuation, humanitarian assistance, strikes against short-term visible targets, air defense, strikes against point targets, and strikes against area targets). See Thomason, et al., *Presence Analyses for the Commission on Roles and Missions of the Armed Forces*, op. cit., Appendix C-2.

¹³ Our presentation of general findings is not an endorsement of "cut and paste" planning; we merely offer them as thinking points. We realize that real plans must be tailored to the region, the functions to be performed, and the parties and situation at hand.

Joint Staff planners should think globally about presence—anywhere it might best support our strategy. Second, they should consider all our capabilities and plan to conduct presence operations using situationally tailored force packages. This will maximize our presence reach. Third, to truly think globally, planners should break the Navy and the Marine Corps out of their schedules of deployment to traditional areas of responsibility. Navy and Marine deployments should be flexible—part of the tailored force packages wherever required to achieve the objectives of presence. Finally, planners should focus on the Navy and the Marine Corps, backed up by rapidly deployable forces in CONUS, when thinking about deterrence. They should exploit the capabilities of maritime forces to loiter near the scene of a developing crisis, without need for base access, to prevent it from boiling over.

1. Thinking Globally—Presence Around the World

Reflecting the increasingly global nature of U.S. interests, the United States has begun to conduct more military presence operations outside regions surrounding the former Soviet Union. In the 21st century, planners should think globally about presence and look for opportunities around the world where presence can best further our new national security strategy. Our strategy aims to promote security, prosperity at home, and democracy abroad. By promoting stability—through peacetime engagement, deterrence, and providing crisis response capability—presence promotes all three strategy objectives.¹⁴

2. Joint, Task-Oriented Deployments—Getting the Most Out of Our Forces

Joint, task-oriented deployments can help the United States use its forces most efficiently. Thinking “joint,” and “combined,” allows all the Services to bear the sometimes heavy burden of presence. Tailoring forces for the task at hand minimizes risk without unduly drawing on forces potentially required for other operations. Such joint, tailored deployments might be nontraditional, but they need not be ineffective.

3. Breaking Out of Traditional Navy/Marine Deployment Schedules

The CINCs and the Joint Staff would increase the flexibility of U.S. presence assets if they broke the Navy and Marine Corps out of their schedules of deployments of

¹⁴ See Perry, “Defense in an Age of Hope,” *op. cit.*

CVBGs and ARGs to the three traditional areas of responsibility (AORs): the Mediterranean Sea, the Indian Ocean, and the Western Pacific Ocean. Scheduled deployments tie up assets such that any global deployments outside the AORs would likely violate Navy personnel or operational tempo limitations. The scheduled deployments are also inefficient when they include more force, or different capabilities—not every situation calls for a CVBG, or an ARG—than are needed to be present in theater for longer than they need to be there.

Deploying maritime forces globally and flexibly allows us to achieve economy of force. It maximizes our ability to use maritime forces' unique qualities to greatest advantage. Those qualities include the capability to carry out distinctly naval missions such as blockades and ASW, and the critical capability to remain at sea, free from political constraints (e.g., difficulties in obtaining base access), and yet influence events ashore.

Finally, flexible maritime deployments need not leave the United States vulnerable in the AORs. We achieve peacetime engagement and deterrence by demonstrating our commitment, not through slavish adherence to a deployment schedule. Moreover, we have considerable land-based forces in Europe, Korea, and Southwest Asia, and we can reinforce them in crises with forces from CONUS. Additionally, frequent but unscheduled deployments may better signal concern to our adversaries. For example, the operation of one CVBG in the West Pacific is not extraordinary—it is always there—but the recent deployment of two CVBGs near the Taiwan Strait conveyed our concern over Chinese military exercises and China's intentions toward Taiwan very clearly.

4. Navy/Marine Deterrence—Backed Up by Deployable Forces in CONUS

Because maritime forces can loiter off-shore free from political constraints or base requirements, the Navy and Marine Corps, backed up by deployable land-based forces in CONUS, may be particularly well-suited for presence missions oriented on deterrence. Maritime forces possess a variety of capabilities to punish. They can range in visibility from being completely over the horizon to being present ashore. And the United States has demonstrated a willingness to use force from the sea. Because of their potential visibility and our history of using them, maritime forces present may be more credible deterrents than purely CONUS-based forces. Maritime forces also may be able to move

in and defuse a crisis before the United States can obtain base access in theater and deploy land-based forces.

The Navy and the Marines, however, cannot be everywhere at once, and the same units need not go to the same regions repeatedly. Sometimes deterrence requires the striking power of a CVBG. At other times, it requires the power of amphibious forces to control events ashore. At still others, it requires the multiple capabilities of a combined arms task group.

Finally, each task group deployed to deter need not be large enough to handle all possible threats by itself. Rapidly deployable land-based forces can serve as powerful backup to a maritime task group. If conflict erupted in spite of the presence of U.S. maritime forces, as occurred in our scenario, we would more likely be able to obtain base access in theater and deploy land-based forces to respond. Even without base access, Air Force bombers or Army airborne forces could provide backup directly from CONUS. As recently as September 1996, bombers flying from Guam reinforced Navy ships in a cruise missile attack against Iraq. Using forces from CONUS to back up maritime forces increases the flexibility of the Navy and Marine Corps to participate in more presence operations. It thereby extends the reach of U.S. deterrence and furthers the achievement of the goals of presence.

D. THE FINAL WORDS: FLEXIBLE PRESENCE

Flexible presence should be the guiding concept for operations in the 21st century: joint, task-oriented deployments as required to accomplish our objectives, using small forces forward, backed up by larger forces rapidly deployable from CONUS. This approach will maximize the utility of all our forces for presence. And it will enable the United States to pursue its national security strategy around the world, even without the resources having to be everywhere at once.

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13. ABSTRACT (Maximum 200 words)

With the end of the Cold War and the advent of a much leaner U.S. military, some question the value to the United States of an overseas military presence. This paper discusses why presence remains important, the objectives of presence in the context of the U.S. national security strategy, and how presence operations can help achieve those objectives. It concludes that CINCs and Joint Staff planners should think about presence globally--anywhere it might best support our strategy. To maximize our presence reach, they should consider the capabilities of all the Services, and plan to conduct operations using situationally tailored force packages. Accordingly, they should break the Navy and the Marine Corps out of their schedules of deployments to traditional areas of responsibility and use maritime assets as part of tailored force packages wherever required to achieve our objectives. Finally, when thinking about deterrence, planners should focus on small Navy and Marine Corps task forces deployed forward, backed up by rapidly deployable forces from CONUS. They should exploit the abilities of maritime forces to loiter near the scenes of developing crises to deter conflict, and of CONUS-based forces to strike or reinforce quickly if needed. Flexible presence should be a guiding strategic concept for the 21st century.

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